

7. Homeless Single Persons

The composition of the homeless population is changing nearly as fast as the population is growing. The predominance of the single, white, alcoholic male is being eroded by the increase of homeless families, especially female heads of single families, and their children. On an average night in 1991, 73 percent of the homeless were likely to be single individuals; but the rapid increase families and particularly in homeless children, lowered the single individual percentage of the homeless population in 1992 to 66 percent of the total. In 1993, 68 percent of the total homeless were single individuals, while in 1994, 63 percent were single individuals. In both 1995 and 1996 about 62 percent of the total homeless were single individuals.

Utah's homeless population is still dominated by single males: in 1991, 63 percent of the sheltered homeless population was likely to be single males, while 86 percent of the sheltered homeless *single* population was likely to be male. The 1992 numbers were 62 percent of the total homeless population single male, and 88 percent of the single population males. In 1993, 56 percent of the total homeless population was male, while 83 percent of the single homeless population was male. In 1994, 81 percent of single homeless people were male. This trend has continued as 82 percent of the total homeless population in both 1995 and 1996 were single males.

The percentage of the homeless individuals varies from county to county. In Weber County, for example, individuals made up 77 percent of the sheltered homeless population in 1991, 73 percent in 1992, 69 percent in 1993, 66 percent in 1994, 67 percent in 1995, and 64 percent in 1998. Salt Lake County was similar to Weber, with 74 percent in 1991, 72 percent in 1992 and 1993, 65 percent in 1994, 68 percent in 1995, and 53 percent in 1996. Utah County, which has few programs for single persons but resources for families, showed that 55 percent of those sheltered in 1991 were single, 53 percent in 1992, 35 percent in 1993, 28 percent in 1994, 30 percent in 1995, and 61 percent in 1996. The remaining areas of the state are even less likely to serve single individuals—68 percent of those sheltered in 1991 were single, in 1992 that had dropped to 41 percent, 70 percent in 1993, 53 percent in 1994, 62 percent in 1995, and 59 percent in 1996. One suspects that, particularly in Utah county, this partly reflects success in providing services for women and families and a corresponding lack of attention to the needs of single men.

In an article by Peter Marin that appeared in the July 8, 1991, issue of *Nation*, several hypotheses were presented to explain why the vast majority of homeless individuals are single men. First, Mr. Marin wrote that although life on the streets is dangerous for men, it is even more so for women. Therefore, while "many men in trouble almost naturally drift onto the streets, women do almost anything to avoid it." Second, private and public shelter and services offered to women are far better than those offered to single men. Third, Marin speculates that women are "accustomed to asking for help while men are not; women therefore make better use of available resources." Fourth, young men are more readily released to the streets while young women are kept at home even under the most extreme circumstances. Finally, Mr. Marin suggests that the majority of employment opportunities for the transient and homeless are reserved to men because of their physical nature.¹

¹Peter Marin, "Why Are the Homeless Mainly Single Men?," *The Nation* (Volume 253, Number 2), July 8, 1991, pp. 46-51.

"The provision of services to homeless men in the United States has traditionally been left to religious and charitable endeavors," write Richard J. First and Beverly G. Toomey. "Programs involving cash and in-kind benefits in the public sector have served the needs of women and children, the elderly, and the handicapped. Able-bodied males, who neither fit these categories nor meet the demands of the job market, are left with very few sources of support. The stigma of public dependency persists for males."² Stereotypes about homeless single men ignore the fact that not all homeless men can work: First and Toomey did a study based on interviews with 979 men in Ohio, and found they fell into three groups: (1) Long-Term Needs Group, or those severely disabled by mental illness, behavioral disturbances, and severe substance abuse; "the prospects for individuals in this group returning to total independence are very limited. Many will need consistent, long-term support at a level that assures that basic needs for food, shelter, and related social services are provided."³ (2) Moderate Needs Group, which are "homeless men who are moderately disabled but can be viewed as having the potential for maintaining a semi-independent life-style." These groups face "serious barriers ... for their long-term success in a secondary job market that involves episodic part-time employment." (3) Short-Term Needs Group, "men who are the least risk of long term homelessness". First and Toomey write that "service needs for single males in this category are minimal except for shelter..." They found that "the number of homeless men who fall in this category is high, 342 (43 percent) of the study sample".⁴

First and Toomey suggest that "it is probable that almost half of these homeless men could return to independence following short-term interventions and policy initiatives leading to job creation. It is also evident that another third of the homeless men would benefit from intensive rehabilitative services so that they could return to some form of independent or at least semi-independent living arrangements. However, the data in this study reveal that a quarter of our homeless male population is seriously disabled.... The solution for this group cannot be found in the traditional belief that we must 'fix' the needy so that they're restored to independence."⁵ Utah's homeless single men fall into these same categories. If the needs of all three groups are taken into account, a realistic homeless policy for single individuals can be achieved.

The homeless population is much younger than in the past. In the late 1960s, for example, the median age was between 50 and 54. Nationally, only about 6 percent are now over 60 and only 10 to 15 percent are over 50. By way of comparison, in 1991, 1992, and 1993, only 3 percent of the sheltered homeless single population was older than 65; in 1994 that had risen to 5 percent, and in both 1995 and 1996 it fell once again between 3 and 4 percent. but the numbers of individuals concerned (a low of eleven, a high of 50) is so low that it is probably statistically insignificant. Data compiled by the State Health Department from a slightly different statistical base are similar: they reported that only 3 percent of those surveyed were 60 or older and only 12 percent were older than 50, both well below national averages.

²Richard J. First and Beverly G. Toomey, "Homeless Men and the Work Ethic," *Social Service Review* (March 1989), pp. 113-14.

³Richard J. First and Beverly G. Toomey, "Homeless Men and the Work Ethic," *Social Service Review* (March 1989), p. 120.

⁴Richard J. First and Beverly G. Toomey, "Homeless Men and the Work Ethic," *Social Service Review* (March 1989), pp. 120-24.

⁵Richard J. First and Beverly G. Toomey, "Homeless Men and the Work Ethic," *Social Service Review* (March 1989), p. 125.

There are two reasons why the homeless population is younger. First, life on the street is harsh and unforgiving and requires the strength and stamina that older persons may lack. Second, there are a number of "safety net" programs which provide help to potentially homeless elderly.⁶ Utah's point prevalence counts, however, surprisingly suggest that the median age Utah's homeless population is actually equal to or higher than the national average. In addition, the Health Department survey in 1991 calculated the median age of those surveyed at between 35 and 36. The Task Force in 1986, reported that the median age of those they interviewed was in fact 33.5 years, 2.5 years below the national average.

The racial characteristics of Utah's homeless population are of great interest because of their ever changing nature. Traditionally, it has been the white male who has made up the overwhelming majority of homeless individuals. Both 1991 point prevalence surveys generally support this with white individuals accounting for 74 percent of the homeless individuals in January and 70 percent in July. Many persons view the racial breakdown of the homeless as "balanced." Nevertheless, upon comparing the ethnic percentages of the general population to the percentages of ethnic homeless, an imbalance clearly exists.

Racial characteristics, like gender, change somewhat county to county as well as from each of the four counts. For example, in Utah County the Caucasian population has varied from 71 to 89 percent of the total single homeless individuals, while Hispanics have been from five to 19 percent of that county's total. In Salt Lake County Caucasians are from 64 to 80 percent of the total, with African Americans varying from 3 to 16 percent, Hispanics from 8 to 20 percent, and others zero to 3 percent. Weber County has varied even more widely, with from 44 to 79 percent white, and 3 to 13 percent African American, 5 to 23 percent Hispanic, and 2 to 8 percent Native American. The other counties of the state consistently report high percentages of Caucasians, with Hispanics as high as 13 percent of the remainder.

TABLE I							
RACIAL BREAKDOWN OF THE GENERAL POPULATION AS COMPARED TO THE RACIAL BREAKDOWN OF HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS⁶⁶							
Ethnicity	% of General Population	1/31/91	1/31/92	1/31/93	1/31/94	1/31/95	1/31/96
Caucasian	94	75	74	68	68	53	71
African Am	0.6	8	7	9	8	4	13
Hispanic	5	11	14	8	14	8	12
Asian/PI	2	1	0.41	0.72	1	0	.9
Native Am	1	4	4	5	5	3	3
Other	2	0.26	0	8	1	0	.1
Multi-Racial	NA	NA	NA	1	1	32 (not rep)	.3

⁶⁶U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters* (May 1984), p. 29.